

20 Necessities that Are Hard to Find During Disasters

Consumerism is built around enabling people's addiction to convenience. But when things go sideways, the power blinks off, the internet goes down, and all the little cogs, wheels and belts stop spinning. It just happened to two whole countries. Spain, Portugal and Andorra lost power and, as I write this article, no one can tell us why it or how it happened.

It is not my intent to minimize this event in any way, it sounds like people likely died as a result, and millions of people were without power. But fortunately, electricity was restored in about a day. What if critical infrastructure was permanently damaged and the grid didn't power back up? As awful as it was, it could have been far worse.

To prepare for such a situation we must first consider the scope of products and services that are affected by power failure.



Immediate Shortages

Some necessities instantly become unavailable the moment the power is lost.

1. Fuel & EV Recharging Stations

Unable to operate electric pumps to access the fuel sitting in underground tanks, nearly all gas stations will be unable to sell gas. Electric charging stations will obviously also be without power. Without electricity and unable to access the fuel on hand, transportation will grind to a halt as soon as whatever gas is in the tanks of autos is used up.

One summer, my family was traveling from Arizona to Northern Utah. We got as far as Richfield and there was a power outage. No gas station in town had the ability to pump gas out of their underground tanks. We drove all over town looking for gas, which didn't take very long as Richfield was very small at the time and ended up spending the night. Luckily, the power was restored the next day and we continued the journey.

The next vehicle we purchased was a Chevy Suburban that had a 40-gallon main fuel tank and two auxiliary 20-gallon saddle tanks. If necessary, it could make the 750-mile journey from Scottsdale to Cache Valley without refueling.

2. Cellular Communications

Mobile networks are dependent on electricity. Backups are short-term. Data centers and fiber optics have limited backups. Even when mobiles systems are still powered by their backup systems, they are often overwhelmed by increased traffic.

Part of this is simply due to human nature. When disasters happen, people pick up the phone to check on loved ones. Any parent understands this. We feel a strong instinctual compulsion to ensure that our offspring survives. The word for this type of call, in emergency management parlance, is welfare check. They are assigned low priority in managed radio nets.

Like panic buying and hoarding, our tendencies work against society, crashing our mobile communications networks.

If voice calls will not go through, try text or data. Each uses a different system, and one may still work even if another does not. If your cellphone doesn't work. Try a landline. Landlines are much more reliable in emergencies than mobile networks, which is a good reason to have one.

3. Money and Portable Wealth

With few exceptions, bankcards and credit cards don't work when the grid is down. In the blink of an eye, it doesn't matter how many millions you have socked away in accounts. Any business that takes place suddenly must happen in cash or for barter.

This will be a shock for most people because the plastic card in their wallet or smartphone version of it in their phone is their go-to tool. When they have a problem, that's what they reach for, and now it won't work anymore.

Goods and services will be exchanged for cans of food, precious metals and cash, but cash will only work as long as people still have faith in it because blind faith is all that has been backing up the dollar for decades.

Short-term Shortages

Other necessities will become unavailable within hours.

4. Potable Water

Any disaster that knocks out electricity also takes modern water treatment plants offline. Water treatment plants have been controlled by computers for decades. Unless your municipality has end-to-end gravity fed water, you will need a water source. Even if it does, you will need the means to treat it. Boiling is more effective but requires fuel.

5. Alarm Systems

Most alarm systems are largely dependent on electricity, the internet, monitoring and police response. These will be useless. With the grid down, your alarm system must run on batteries and summon an armed response from nearby.

6. Natural Gas

As people use natural gas to heat their home and cook, the lines lose pressure. Without electricity to run the SCADA

controllers, compressors and electric motors that turn valves, the system will not be able to regulate the pressure of gas lines. The end result for the consumer is that the flow of natural gas will eventually stop.

LNG is stored at much higher pressures than LPG, making home storage impractical. If you want to store gas for heating, store propane.

7. Propane and Propane Accessories

Desperate to cook raw foods from refrigerators and freezers before they spoil, many households foolishly fire up their propane grills. They get the job done, but are extremely inefficient and waste precious, and now irreplaceable fuel.

Cooking a freezer full of meat and boiling water will quickly deplete the 5-gallon tank and a half of propane that the average suburbanite has on hand. Homes that run on propane feature larger tanks, usually 500-1000-gallons or so. They will fare much better, but as most tanks are above ground eyesores, everyone will know they have them.

Using camping stoves, or better yet, efficient backpacking stoves is much more effective than firing up the propane grill to cook your food. Plan ahead to deal with your fridge and freezer full of food. If you cook that food, you'll eat well for a few days until it spoils. If you preserve it by home canning it, drying it or freeze drying it, it will last much longer. But doing that without electricity takes planning and preparation. Think through the process and then do a small test run. Learn from your mistakes, rinse and repeat.

8. Matches, Firewood and Tools and Supplies to Cut, Haul and Store It

In major emergencies, most people do not have fuel and end up burning wood to cook, boil water and heat their homes.

Mid-term Shortages

Some necessities may take days or weeks to run out.

9. Firearms & Ammunition

When the power doesn't come back on after a couple of days, people will get scared. Scared people do stupid things. Firearms and ammunition will dry up fast.

10. Prescription Medications & Medical Supplies

Without potable water, hospitals are virtually paralyzed. Without health insurance, internet, banking or transportation, healthcare and pharmacies will largely shut down.

11. Food

Not all communities are a few meals away from anarchy, but some surely are. Households that eat most of their meals out or have meals delivered typically have the least food on hand. The good news for them is that they are spending so much money eating out and ordering in that they will have plenty of money to buy food storage if they simply eat at home for a while to build up food storage.

If you are new to food storage, start storing shelf stable foods that you normally eat. Focus on foods that need little or no cooking or preparation. Build up a week's worth, then a month and so on. Don't worry about long-term food storage until you have three months of regular shelf-stable foods.

Storing dry pack foods that require a lot of cooking and preparation to make them edible is more involved because you need a way to cook it, fuel, a lot of water, a wheat grinder, cooking oils, cooking catalysts, and so on. I recommend doing that too, but that's another article.

Gasoline (Again)

Eventually, gas stations will devise solutions to access the fuel in their underground tanks, but much of it will be commandeered by various levels of government. Without electricity to drive pumps and compressors, most oil refineries will sit idle. The government will bring in equipment to generate electricity to run a few refineries, but most of the fuel that they refine will go to the government and emergency services and fuel output will not be able to match demand.

12. Batteries

Batteries of all sizes will be needed. Small batteries will be needed immediately for lighting and to run handheld radios. Later on, larger batteries will be needed to make battery banks that will power cordless power tools, fans, pumps compressors, refrigerators and all sorts of things.

13. Two-way Radios

When the power goes out and other forms of communications go down, two-way radios are the first form of communication to come back online. All that is needed for simplex radio communication is two people with radios, batteries, and a communications plan. No infrastructure is needed.

While their capabilities may seem somewhat limited compared to smartphones and internet, radio may be your only way to get information. And without transportation, being about to talk to someone, even someone just a few miles away, is a really big deal because it means you don't have to walk miles to talk to them or wait until the next time you see them.

Long Term Shortages

HEMP (High Altitude Electromagnetic Pulse) happens when a nuclear weapon detonated high enough in the atmosphere to excite high energy electrons unleashing a potentially

devastating effect called Compton Scattering and generating 1000x the EM field strength they would if they had exploded near the ground. According to Dr. Peter Pry, a scientist on the congressional EMP Commission and a subject matter expert on EMP, long term power outages, such as those caused by HEMP will kill “the old-fashioned way”, through famine and disease.

14. Heirloom Seeds, Garden Soil, Mulch, Materials and Fasteners to Build and Expand Gardens

Producing it yourself is the only way to ensure that you have food in a long-term disaster.

15. Chickens, Chicken Feed, Materials and Fasteners to Build and Operate Chicken Coops and Hatcheries

Chickens provide a steady supply of eggs, meat and fertilizer for the garden. As such, chickens and everything associated with raising them become scarce and commensurately expensive if you are lucky enough to strike a barter.

16. Canning & Food Preservation Supplies

Here in North America, what we grow during our growing season has to feed us all year, so food must be preserved through winter and spring.



17. Hygiene Supplies

Soap and dental floss are important to store. Soap in particular if takes a great deal of fuel and material to make and is cheap and easier to store ahead of time.

One thing you don't need to stockpile is toilet paper. As happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, people will panic and buy it up, but in all of the thousands of survival ordeals that I have researched, not one death was attributed to lack of toilet paper. Poke some holes in the cap of the water

bottle or use a bladder with a squirt cap or a hot water bottle as a travel bidet and wash with neutral soap (soap with a neutral or mildly basic pH so it won't burn your Chuck Shumer).

18. Footwear and Shoe Repair Gear

Shoe leather used to be our primary source of transportation and may well be again someday. Invest in several pair of high-quality leather boots that can be resoled.

19. Clothing, Cloth, Thread and Sewing Supplies

You will need quality outdoor clothing, socks and outerwear.

20. Rechargeable Small Batteries, 12v DC Battery Charger & Solar System with Battery Pack

These give you the ability to generate your own power. All you need is sunlight.